

## Cooking Up Solutions to NCLB

*If you like sausages and the law, don't watch either being made.*

This familiar adage is intended as a warning to the faint-hearted and politically naïve to avert their eyes from the messy process of governing. It's especially wise advice these days, as members of Congress, presidential candidates, administration officials, and political pundits jockey for position in the unfolding budget battle and presidential campaign.

As veterans of Washington, D.C., we're neither faint-hearted nor politically naïve. A "pinch of this and a dash of that" is a given in politics, just as it is in sausage-making. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), still officially known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is no exception.

As the ESEA debate simmers at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, the politics of the discussion is overpowering the fundamental principles of this important legislation. Each of our associations is working to advance specific components of ESEA, but this week, we are convening our grassroots leaders—state association executives, elementary and middle-level school principals, and district superintendents—on the Hill to encourage elected officials to pass sound, even-handed legislation based on these bedrock principles:

**The federal government's reach into local education should be limited.** Local values, circumstances, and expertise should carry more weight in education decision-making than federal rules and regulations, which, while surely well-intentioned, are often ill-informed. School- and district-based leaders are far more knowledgeable and better equipped to make smart decisions about local schools than officials in Washington, D.C. The federal government should supplement and support the essential work of local schools and districts, not dictate that work.

**Federal funding must be channeled to help our nation's neediest children.** The central purpose of federal involvement in state and local education decisions should continue to ensure equity and access for all children, especially those who arrive at the schoolhouse door with little or no high-quality pre-K learning. They begin behind their peers and typically stay behind. This fact is a tragedy for the children who are



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trapped and for our nation as a whole. Additionally, federal funds should be dispersed through targeted formula grants, not competitive grants. No child should be penalized because his or her school does not have the staff capacity to write—and win—competitive grants. Such a restricted distribution scheme simply does not address the equity gap for at-risk children, further jeopardizing their chance at academic success.

### **Use the right yardsticks to measure student achievement.**

Standardized tests can be one useful measurement of student achievement. They assess a student's performance at a specific moment of time in limited areas. As such, they should not be used as the sole or primary measure of a student's learning, to evaluate achievement across a broad curriculum, or to judge performance for a school year. Given the broad goals our nation has for education, "standardized tests in a small set of subjects create a risk that some critical goals will be shortchanged," states new research from RAND for the Sandler Foundation. Students and schools succeed in multiple ways; they should be measured in multiple ways.

**Invest in the people who can improve entire schools—principals, working with their superintendents.** ESEA's Title II provides funds for professional development for educators, but a paltry 3 percent is allocated for principals and none for superintendents. We wholeheartedly endorse any support teachers receive for professional development. A great teacher can create a great classroom. But only a principal can lead the team who can create an excellent school. And only a districtwide team of principals, working with a supportive superintendent, can create a great district, where every classroom, not an isolated few, and every school, not a lone outlier, is fully engaged in providing ever-better teaching and learning.

All of us—educators, legislators, association executives—share the same goal: systemic school improvement. School leaders are rightly held to a high level of appropriate accountability for making our schools better, but they cannot do this alone. It's time to hold elected leaders to the same standard of appropriate accountability. Set aside the politics of ESEA and get on with the business of governing. Make an education law that works for schools and children.